

Illuminating Jewish Thought
Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and
the Messianic Era



Michael Scharf
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Yeshiva University Press



MAGGID

Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank

ILLUMINATING JEWISH THOUGHT

Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and the Messianic Era

The RIETS Hashkafah Series
Rabbi Daniel Z. Feldman, Series Editor

The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of
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Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and the Messianic Era

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*Dedicated in memory of all the cousins
and other relatives of my father Herman Blank
And my mother Ida Adoff Blank
Murdered by the
Germans and their Ukrainian and Polish collaborators*

*Jonathan Blank
October 22, 2017
2 Cheshvan, 5778*

ספר זה מוקדש
לעלוי נשמת
סבא וסבתא
ר' יצחק ומרת פריידע וידר ז"ל
אבא ואמא
ר' אליעזר ומרת הדסה וידר ז"ל
ע"י
דב ומלכה וידר
אלירז ואריאל וידר-אקשטיין
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

*Together with the Woodside community
Where Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank began his journey
From precocious child to talmid chochom
And extraordinary teacher
We rejoice in publication of this sefer as the early fruits
Of his blossoming career as a dedicated teacher whose insights
Refresh and integrate traditional Jewish
Values and Torah learning.
We remember with affection and gratitude
The two pillars of our community who were
Rav Netanel's role models in limud haTorah and ahavas Yisroel
Rabbi Leonard Dickstein z"l
And
Mrs Sarah Landesman a"h
May you continue to grow in Torah lilmod ulelamed
Miriam and Allen Schick*

וראה בנים לבניך

*In gratitude to HaShem,
Dedicated with love
to our children's children*

Chava Bracha

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YOUNG ISRAEL OF RIVERDALE

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Rabbi Mordechai Willig
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Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank, a rising star on the faculty of our yeshiva, has authored an outstanding hashkafic work, "Illuminating Jewish Thought." It is a masterful presentation of the fundamentals of faith, written clearly and annotated thoroughly. The halachic and philosophical works of the Rambam are carefully analyzed. Complementary or opposing views of classical exponents of Jewish thought, such as R. Yehuda Halevi, Ramban, R. Yosef Albo and Abarbanel, are included as well. More recent scholars are also quoted.

The present volume focuses on Redemption. Two others, on belief in Hashem and in Torah, will hopefully follow soon. Rav Wiederblank's comprehensive contribution is invaluable for sincere students of *Sharei Emuna*.

Mordechai Willig



YGW

RABBI AHRON LOPIANSKY

Rosh HaYeshiva

21 Sivan 5776

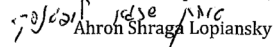
If the world of halacha is a vast forest, then the world of emunos vdeos can only be described as an unending ocean. In the world of halacha, one at least has the Rambam, Tur and Shulchan Aruch, who define the debate, and the key players thereof. One can describe the parameters of the debate, even if the details are unclear to us. But in the world of emunos vdeos, we do not even have a good definition of the issues, and many times the various opinions seem to occupy different dimensions, talking an entirely different language. This has discouraged many a student from learning these topics; while feeling frustrated that they may be well versed in the minutae of the law, but ignorant about the foundations of Judaism; the very Yesodei Hatorah. Others have taken to cherry picking points to their liking and presenting it as the entirety of Judaism.

Hagaon Rav Nesanel Wiederblank has done an incredible job, creating a full outline of the major points of Emunos Vedeos. I have known him since his youth and I can testify that he has the qualities needed to establish a work such as this. He is a major talmid chacham in shas and poskim, and yet has spent much time delving into these areas. He has a dispassionate analytical mind, yet a heart that is 'yareh vchared' of the dvar Hashem. He constantly bears in mind that the very ground in which he is forging a path, is 'admas kodesh', sacred soil. And above all, he is a true anav, who does not allow arrogance or smugness into the sefer that he has so painstakingly and masterfully put together.

The sefer is an outline, though it is voluminous. Its purpose is to structure the issues and opinions; the seeming internal inconsistencies, and the problems vis a vis the sources; the possible resolution of those questions, and the strengths and weakness of the proffered explanations. He tries to stick to the major opinions, but has included opinions that have become contemporarily popular and/ or controversial.

It is a tremendous zikui harabim, and may Hkb"h grant him the strength and wisdom to enlighten the tzibbur in many areas of Torah, and to reach many talmidim both in person and through his seforim.

With great admiration and deep affection,


Ahron Shraga Lopiansky

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צבי שטר
ישרי תשל"ו

Foreword

This book is a monumental work in Jewish philosophy authored by a master educator and profound thinker. Rabbi Netanel Wiederblank has become a beloved teacher to the undergraduate and rabbinic students at Yeshiva University because of his unmitigated willingness and unique ability to address difficult questions relating to the basic axioms and foundations of Jewish faith. He is an expert at elucidating complex concepts with clarity, and at delving into the depths of existential quagmires with deftness.

The focus of Rabbi Wiederblank's current volume, *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife and the Messianic Era* is upon the theological principles of Judaism that relate to eschatological thought. Rabbi Joseph Albo famously broke down the fundamental principles of Jewish faith into three categories: redemption (divine justice), revelation and faith in God. This triumvirate taxonomy provides the framework for this volume dedicated to themes of redemption, and for the planned future volumes of this series which will focus on the other two areas of revelation and faith.

Our Sages have taught **דע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס** – “know how to answer the non-believer” (Avot 2:14). Rabbinic authorities have noted

Foreword

that this imperative includes the requirement to answer the non-believer or questioner that lurks within oneself (see, e.g., Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, *Leaves of Faith*, Vol. 1, at 92-93). One of the purposes of philosophical exploration is to address the vexing questions that occupy the innermost recesses of a person's mind and soul. It is through proper study of these questions that a person can become edified and exalted in order to achieve the highest levels of spiritual devotion and excellence.

Proper study naturally requires a qualified teacher. The Talmud warns that there are certain pitfalls to philosophical study. There are some questions that lie beyond human comprehension and therefore beyond human investigation. Furthermore, when dealing with metaphysical questions, not every student is capable of sufficiently understanding the nuances and subtleties of what is being conveyed by a teacher in these areas (see Chagigah 11b). Only a pedagogue of impeccable credentials of character and faith can enter into this domain and frame the proper methodologies for assembling, dissecting and disseminating information that is intended to clarify and answer the most piercing of philosophical puzzles relating to core principles of Jewish theology. As is clear from the mellifluous testimonials in the opening pages of this work, Rabbi Wiederblank is widely regarded as such an individual.

Much praise is also due to the Executive Editor of the RIETS (Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary) Press, Rabbi Daniel Feldman, who in his inimitably incisive and insightful manner has combed through every sentence in this tome to ensure both substantive and lyrical excellence. In addition, President Richard M. Joel and RIETS Dean Rabbi Menachem Penner have made the RIETS Press an institutional priority, ensuring that high caliber scholarship from the RIETS faculty be available for the benefit of the abundant beneficiaries of the Yeshiva University universe. Finally, Rosh HaYeshiva Emeritus Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm and Dean Emeritus Rabbi Zevulun Charlop continue to serve as role models for the striving towards Torah excellence that is beautified and buttressed through academic rigor.

It is our fervent hope that this volume, together with the other volumes of the RIETS Hashkafah Series, be a source of illumination,

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elucidation and edification for all of its readers. We wish Rabbi Wiederblank, together with his fabulous family, the blessings of good health and peace of mind to be able to complete the future volumes anticipated for this critical contribution to the world of Jewish scholarship.

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Director, RIETS Press

Preface

T

here are several reasons why I should not have written this book.

Firstly, I am unfit. I am not an expert in *machshava* (we will define that term shortly). The focus of my studies always has been the study of Talmud and Halacha (codes).

Secondly, many of the topics covered in this work should not be taught publicly.¹ This seemingly precludes the publication of a work that seeks to present esoteric concepts to a broad audience.

Why, then, have I written this book?

This work has been my *bein ha-zemanim* (vacation) project for a number of years (teaching eight courses per semester does not leave much time to write). However, studying *machshava* has been my *bein ha-zemanim* project for much longer than that (in line with Rama's

1. The Talmud (*Chagiga* 11b) prohibits teaching esoteric wisdom publicly lest someone who is not properly prepared listen in. Even among worthy students, the teacher must be able to give students individual attention to make sure they do not err. Moreover, when it comes to *ma'aseh merkava* (usually understood to be referring to Kabbala or metaphysics), the material cannot be conveyed overtly even to a worthy individual. The student must independently extrapolate the concept from the basic framework set up by the teacher.

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recommendation²). I began teaching *machshava* in the summer of 2006 while serving as scholar-in-residence at Beth Israel Synagogue in Edmonton, Alberta. When I asked the congregants there what type of classes interested them, they responded with topics such as the afterlife, free will, and Israel's chosenness. In attempting to fulfill this request, I sought a source book that presented and elucidated the primary sources on these topics; I was unable to find one. Instead, I began collecting and organizing sources myself. Many of these "source-sheets" form the root of the present work.

A couple of years later, I joined the faculty of Isaac Breuer College (IBC) and James Striar School (JSS) of Yeshiva University. While I enjoyed teaching Talmud, Halacha, and Tanach, my most popular classes were in the realm of Jewish philosophy. The format that students seemed to enjoy most was thematic investigations (such as divine providence and the relationship between Torah and science) as opposed to historical periods (e.g., medieval or modern Jewish philosophy). Thus, despite my lack of training, I was forced to expand my Edmontonian classes into courses.

Finally, in the fall of 2011, I was asked to teach a two-semester course in Jewish philosophy to all first-year semicha students in Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). Until 2010, the curriculum for ordination at RIETS focused on Talmud and Halacha and included practical rabbinic courses as well. However, the yeshiva recognized the need for rabbis to study *machshava*. (Interestingly, several decades earlier R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik advocated mandating the study of philosophy for rabbinical students.³ It took some time for others to realize the prescience of his view.) The three volumes that make up this work are modified lecture notes from those classes.

-
2. R. Moshe Isserles or Rama (1520–1572) in responsum 7 defends his study of philosophy from the attacks of R. Shlomo Luria or Maharshal (1510–1574). Among other things, he writes that he did not pursue these matters during times when others were studying Halacha; instead, he engaged in this quest when others were relaxing, such as during Shabbat and Chol ha-Mo'ed. In chapter 1, we explore Rama's understanding of the role of philosophy.
 3. See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications*, ed. R. Netanel Helfgot, pp. 100–101.

Since offering that course, numerous people have encouraged me to publish these classes, noting the dearth of sophisticated yet accessible English works in the field of *machshava*. I hesitated; there certainly are more knowledgeable and more eloquent scholars. Moreover, as noted earlier, public discussions of esoteric concepts (including mysticism and philosophy) are inappropriate. While I certainly am not the first to openly discuss these topics, and the genuine need for such works justifies their publication in halachic terms (in chapters 1 and 2, we elaborate upon the details of the relevant restrictions), I nevertheless wavered when considering the dangers of error, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding.

The stakes of this enterprise are frightening. What if the book contains errors? (Surely it does.) What if the mistakes relate to a fundamental principle of faith? (I pray they do not.) What if, instead of strengthening *emuna* (faith), my project advances the spread of heresy,⁴ Heaven forbid?⁵ In deliberating, I was reminded of R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch's hesitation concerning the publication of *Horeb*, a book on *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (the reasons for commandments):

There are worries to be weighed. Might I not cause harm instead of helping? ... And suppose my attempt fails? Will not those who would gladly do away with the cause for which I am living use my abortive efforts to strangle this cause entirely?

-
4. Will Durant in *The Story of Philosophy* writes: "The cleverest defenders of a faith are its greatest enemies; for their subtleties engender doubt and stimulate the mind. And if this was so with the writings of Maimonides, so much the more was it the case with the commentaries of Ibn Ezra" (Simon & Schuster, 1961, p. 115). While Durant is certainly wrong about Rambam and Ibn Ezra (see Ramban's "Long Letter"), the concern must be considered; see Ra'avad on *Hilchot Teshuva* 5:5 discussed in 14.3.
 5. I further hesitate when considering the warning of my teacher, R. Hershel Schachter (based on *Chatam Sofer* OC 208), that any sort of Torah publication for the sake of self-aggrandizement is prohibited based on the prohibition against writing down the oral Torah.

Preface

“See here,” they would gloat, “some entirely new attempts to rehabilitate Judaism – total failures!”⁶

If this concern troubled a giant like R. Hirsch, it certainly should justify my hesitation.

My hesitation was further heightened when my wife suggested the title, “Bombardments in Jewish Thought: Making the Complex Simple and the Simple Complex,” or, even better, “Meandering Footnotes in Jewish Thought.” Am I really helping people with this book or just confusing them (and myself)? Even worse, perhaps I am raising questions that I am unable to answer (see Ra’avad cited in 14.3).

Eventually, I decided to proceed. I therefore pray that the Source of all wisdom protect me from error, and whenever errors creep in, I beg that He prevent them from misguiding people.

With this in mind, I hereby declare that much of the analysis offered in this work is tentative. If something seems troubling, do not presume that it is correct. Instead, analyze the source independently or consult an expert. Imagine that this work is a *chavruta* (study partner). We read the texts together, with each of us offering our own understanding. I do not seek to impose my understanding upon anyone and hope that others will share their insights with me. I am very happy to receive feedback.

The primary goal of this work is to collect and analyze the various traditional sources on these important topics. For the most part, the texts speak for themselves, and I have tried to refrain from inserting my biases into their holy words. My goal is to organize, illuminate, and contextualize. Finding the right balance of depth and scope has proven to be a challenge. On the one hand, this is meant as a survey – to present the different views, not my own opinions. At the same time, if it is devoid of analysis, it will not help the intended audience. As the book developed, I found, to my chagrin, that due to the complexity of the texts, there was more space devoted to exposition than I would have liked. But despite my elucidations, the texts demand rigorous study to

6. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters*, Letter Nineteen, p. 333 in the Feldheim edition.

be appreciated. The Talmud informs us that the words of Torah are the elixir of life for those who study them intensely; failure to do so makes these texts poisonous.⁷ Ideally, then, one should read the texts, analyze them attentively, and not trust my interpretation.

WHAT IS MACHSHAVA?

For lack of better alternatives, people use the term *machshava*, sometimes called *Machshevet Yisrael*, to refer to Jewish thought. What is meant by *machshava*? Some might define *machshava* as all non-halachic portions of the oral Torah (*Torah she-be'al peh*). Certainly this includes Aggada, but what else? One of the things we will consider in chapter 1 is what is included in what we call *machshava*. Some argue that it includes philosophy; others vehemently disagree. Likewise, some contend for the inclusion of Kabbala, and, of course, others differ. Most people think of books and authors like *Emunot ve-Dei'ot*, *Chovot ha-Levavot*, *Moreh ha-Nevuchim*, *Kuzari*, Maharal, Ramchal, *Tanya*, *Nefesh ha-Chayim*, and *Michtav mei-Eliyahu* when they refer to *machshava*, and while I certainly make extensive use of these works, we will see that we must not limit ourselves to this standard reading list. Hopefully, we will be in a better position to define *machshava* after we have begun studying it.

A note on our usage of the word philosophy: When using the word philosophy in this volume, what exactly do we mean? One modern dictionary defines the word as “a study that attempts to discover the fundamental principles of the sciences, the arts, and the world that the sciences and arts deal with” (*The American Heritage New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, third edition). When the works cited in this book refer to philosophy, however, they usually have in mind a narrower definition. Often, they are referring to (medieval) metaphysics and, to a lesser extent, epistemology. This is because their goal was not pursuing philosophy in general, but an understanding of God and Torah. For

7. תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד ב
 דברי תורה יש בם להמית ולהחיות. היינו דאמר רבא: למיימינים בה - סמא דחיי, למשמאילים
 בה - סמא דמותא.
 רש"י מסכת שבת דף פח עמוד ב
 למיימינים - עסוקים בכל כחם, וטרודים לדעת סודה, כאדם המשתמש ביד ימינו שהיא עיקר.

example, none of these thinkers would advocate considering the Problem of Many (a philosophical puzzle concerning the demarcations of an object without clearly demarcated borders), since it has no direct relation to understanding God and improving one's *emuna* (faith in God). While this focus might imply a narrow range of interest, we shall see in 1.2 that the matter is not simple, with some thinkers considering a wide range of questions. It is not always obvious what will bring a person to a greater understanding of God.

**NOT ALL TOPICS IN THIS WORK
ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT**

R. Yitzchak Arama (1420–1494) asks why God did not resolve many of the numerous philosophical riddles that have plagued scholars throughout the ages.⁸ In fact, he notes that the text of the Ten Commandments is, from a philosophical perspective, quite elementary. He explains that the Ten Commandments do contain the basic theological concepts all Jews must know, such as God's necessary existence (אנוכי ה' אלוֹקִיךָ), I am Hashem, your God,⁹ His providence (אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים),

8. For example, one might have expected God to address the following mysteries:

עקירת יצחק שמות שער מה (פרשת יתרו)

איך יושפעו רבוי הנמצאות המתחלפות בשווי מסבה אחת פשוטה בתכלית הפשיטות. או איך הושפע מהנבדל הראשון הגלגל עם היותו בעל חומר ולא עוד כי גם צורתו ומניעו. גם בעניני הידיעה האלהית איכה ידע את הדברים הרבים והמתחלפים בידיעה אחת פשוטה מכל צד. גם הדברים המתחדשים בלי התחדש בו ידיעה כלל גם העתידים בלי התלות בהעדר גם הצורך משני קצות האיפשר במעשים הבחיריים מבלי הכרעת מציאותו. או שידועה נאמנה אם הגלגל הוא בעל נפש או לא ותכלית תנועותיהם וסבותיהם ומספרם האמת.

9. Rambam (*Hilchot Yesodei ha-Torah* ch. 1) understands that the verse אלוֹהִיךָ ה' אנוכי, "I am Hashem, your God," expresses: (a) there is a First Being (God), (b) who brought into being all existence, (c) such that all other existents are contingent, depending upon His existence. How does "I am Hashem your God" express all of the above? Presumably, this is because the spelling of the word Hashem (the tetragrammaton) refers to God's eternal existence (יקוֹן=היה והוה ויהיה). Thus, by saying "I am Hashem your God," He instructed us to believe in His necessary existence.

Ramban (*Shemot* 20:1), who more or less follows Rambam's understanding, explicates:

אנוכי ה' אלוֹקִיךָ: הדיבור הזה מצוות עשה, אמר אנכי ה', יורה ויצוה אותם שידעו ויאמינו כי יש ה', והוא אלהים להם, כלומר הוה, קדמון, מאתו היה הכל בחפץ ויכולת, והוא אלהים להם, שחייבים לעבוד אותו. ואמר אשר הוצאתיך מארץ מצרים, כי הוצאתם משם תורה על

who took you out of the land of Egypt), and His creation of the world (כי ששת ימים עשה ה' את השמים ואת הארץ את הים ואת כל אשר בם), for in six days God made the heaven and the earth, the sea and all that is in them). These concepts are essential for every Jew to know, and they therefore are incorporated in the Ten Commandments. Including the resolutions to the manifold philosophical conundrums would not have strengthened most people's faith. On the contrary, it would have caused confusion. Moreover, while errors in the basic tenets of faith are dangerous (such as denial of God's providence), confusion in some of the less important philosophical questions (such as the precise nature of His providence) proves less problematic.¹⁰ Thus, not all religious convictions are enumerated in Rambam's thirteen principles of faith. The Ten Commandments, which are addressed to the masses of the Jews who left Egypt as well as the masses in each and every generation, focus on that which is primary.¹¹ This does not mean that

המציאות ועל החפץ, כי בידיעה ובהשגחה ממנו יצאנו משם, וגם תורה על החרוש, כי עם קדמות העולם לא ישתנה דבר מטבעו, ותורה על היכולת, והיכולת תורה על הייחוד, כמו שאמר (ט:יד) בעבור תרע כי אין כמוני בכל הארץ. וזה טעם אשר הוצאתיך, כי הם היודעים ועדים בכל אלה.

By saying "I am Hashem," God is demanding that we believe in His existence and eternity, that He is the source for all that exists, and that He is all powerful. Ramban notes an additional point not explicated by Rambam. By adding *Elokecha*, your God, God is instructing us to serve Him. Ramban continues:

וטעם מבית עבדים - שהיו עומדים במצרים בבית עבדים, שבויים לפרעה, ואמר להם זה שהם חייבין שיהיה ה' הגדול והנכבד והנורא הזה להם לאלהים, שיעבדוהו, כי הוא פדה אותם מעבדות מצרים, כטעם עבדי הם אשר הוצאתי אותם מארץ מצרים (ויקרא כה:נה).

By adding that He took us out of Egypt, God informs us that He has a will and is involved in the world. Moreover, by taking us out of Egypt, we become subjugated to His service.

10. עקידת יצחק שמות שער מה (פרשת יתרו) כי השבוש בכמו אלו הענינים לא יביאם לידי כפירה ולא אל הקל במצוה ממצותיו. אמנם היתה כוונת המעמד ההוא לתקן בו הסכלות הקנייני אשר נפלו עליו מעייני הפלוסופי' בחקירת' אשר באו בחזק טענותיהם המוזייתות לקיים אלוה בעולם כפי רצונם ועיונם כי הנה הם מודים במציאותו.
11. Moreover, R. Yitzchak Arama notes, in order to present the basics in a simple manner that is both accessible to all and will inspire all, there is a risk that some misinterpretation will result. In fact, Rambam (*Moreh ha-Nevuchim* 1:46), when considering the many instances where a simple (though inaccurate) reading to the Torah's text implies corporeality, suggests that this was necessary because belief in an incorporeal God was impossible for many people (the masses) during the biblical and prophetic

answering ancillary questions is not valuable; it is, however, only of secondary importance.¹²

In this book, we deal with issues that are basic and fundamental as well as those that are tangential. While this work attempts to be a survey of sorts, it does not attempt comprehensiveness. Admittedly, some of the topics discussed are somewhat inconsequential and inappropriate for a survey-style book. They were chosen either because I found them particularly interesting or because they address questions that I am frequently asked.

IS THIS AN ACADEMIC BOOK?

The style of this book does not fit neatly into the general categories, but the goal of this work is no different than all traditional *sefarim*. Thus, while we occasionally draw upon valuable academic contributions to the field of Jewish philosophy, methodologically this work is non-academic.

To better appreciate this, let us briefly compare the differences between Torah, and especially *machshava*, as studied in the academy versus Torah as studied in the *beit midrash*. In chapter 1 we shall examine numerous sources that emphasize that the purpose of studying Aggada is to inspire fear of heaven (*yirat shamayim*). This is certainly

period. Accordingly, Scripture is written in a way that implies corporeality since it will, at the very least, bring these people to belief in God. We will consider the implications of this radical possibility in 11.4.

12. Indeed, at the end of *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* (3:54) Rambam writes that understanding the nature of providence is part of the perfection man should aspire to achieve:

It is clear that perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is.

At the same time, earlier (1:72) he notes that fully understanding His providence is impossible:

The governance and the providence of Him, may He be exalted, accompany the world as a whole in such a way that the manner and true reality of this accompaniment are hidden from us: the faculties of human beings are inadequate to understand this.

not the goal of the academic scholarship on Aggada. Of course, we are not discussing the motivation of particular academicians. It is certainly the case that many academicians personally choose academic Jewish studies because they hope they will promote fear of heaven. Likewise, there are individuals who pursue physics because they seek closeness to the Creator. However, that is not the objective of the approach and this will very much affect methodology. Along these lines, R. Jeremy Wieder deftly summarizes the difference between the goal of the study of Talmud in the academy versus the *beit midrash*:

Putting aside the question of what might stimulate the academician's interest in the text in the first place, the academician is typically interested in the text either as a body of literature worthy of study as such, or for its value as a primary source that sheds light on the history or sociology of the context from which the text emerged – the Babylonian Jewish community of the middle of the first millennium CE. The student in the Bet Midrash, however, is generally interested in the text as a foundation for normative halakhic practice and moral instruction; the text is not only the vestige of a bygone era or primary source for the history of the Classical period, but one very much relevant to day-to-day life.¹³

More importantly, I would add, is that the difference lies in the ultimate goal. For the student of the *beit midrash*, the goal is to discover the ultimate truth. The Talmud, which is the word of God, is a repository of that truth. That is not to say that the Talmud is the direct word of God and contains no human contribution. We will explore the exact nature of the human contribution in the oral law in chapter 28. However, whatever approach one takes to the question of the evolution of the Talmud, all traditional religious thinkers approach the Talmud as the word of God and studying Talmud as a means of encountering and hopefully absorbing some of that ultimate truth. The same can be said, more or

13. "Academic Talmud in the Bet Midrash," <https://www.jewishideas.org/articles/academic-talmud-bet-midrash>.

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less, when studying the works of all of the *chachmei ha-mesora* (we will define this term shortly). Thus, while the student of the *beit midrash* is fully aware that he may misunderstand the sources and fail to arrive at the truth, he has no doubt that that the truth can be discovered within the source that he is studying.

This relates to a second distinction that differentiates our approach. Again, R. Wieder:

The academician does not necessarily regard the text with reverence. It is not different in its inherent value from any other text from any particular period. The academician does not (again, necessarily) have reverence for the Sages of the Talmud – either as people or as moral guides for his or her life. The traditional student however, regards the text as sacred, and the Sages are major figures in terms of the *masorah* – the chain of Jewish tradition going back to Sinai. While one can acknowledge that the Sages were human in every sense of the word, the student of the Bet Midrash holds these individuals in the highest of esteem and is reluctant, if not completely unwilling, to cast aspersions upon them or attribute ulterior motivations to their rulings.

Here too, we follow the traditional route.

Another distinction between our approach and the standard academic model is one of focus. In general, we seek to understand the meaning of a text from within that text. Our concern is not what historical or sociological factors might have led Rambam to his particular conclusion (unless they are mentioned in the text). That is not to say that there is no value in investigating these factors. However, this is not our focus.

This last point relates to the ahistorical nature of this book. Usually, academic works of this genre will examine thinkers (e.g., the philosophy of Maimonides), or periods (e.g., early modern thinkers), or, if discussing topics, will divide sources into periods. In examining the

problem of evil, for example, they may consider biblical approaches (likely with further subdivisions), Talmudic views, medieval thinkers, etc. I have deviated from this style, approaching, instead, each topic as a *sugya*¹⁴ whose perspectives and possibilities are explored in a sometimes ahistorical manner.

That is not to say that historical divisions are unimportant. Knowing whether a view is espoused by a Rishon (medieval commentary) or Acharon (a term used to signify the leading rabbis from roughly the sixteenth century to the present) does make a difference; however, it is a secondary distinction. Our primary goal, and the goal of all Torah study, is to arrive at the truth. Generally, though, I present older sources first.

Thus, for the most part, this work presents a thinker's words but omits his biography. Occasionally we introduce some of the lesser-known thinkers (such as R. Crescas in 14.4 and R. Tzadok in 14.5) with brief biographical sketches before presenting their work, as some historical context is particularly relevant to their writings. However, we omit sketches of the more well-known scholars, such as Rambam and Ramban, trusting that the reader already has been introduced to these giants. In all cases, further historical investigation will enrich the experience but is beyond the scope of this work.

One final non-academic stylistic convention to note. Insofar as this is a book of Jewish philosophy written for Jews from a classical Jewish perspective, it is addressed toward members of the Jewish faith community. Thus, pronouns like "we" or "us" occasionally refer specifically to Jews. Of course, I hope that non-Jews who read this book will find it to be a valuable resource. This stylistic decision is not intended to exclude anybody; it was chosen to make the writing flow more smoothly.

WHAT WORKS HAVE BEEN INCLUDED?

The Torah formulates what we received at Sinai in an unusual manner.

14. *Sugya* means "topic" and is the basic unit of organization in Talmudic literature.

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וַיִּקְרָא כּוּמוֹ
אֵלֶּה הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וְהַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן ה' בֵּינוּ וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהַר
סִינַי בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה.

These are the statutes, the ordinances, and the *Torahs* (lit., laws) that Hashem gave between Himself and the children of Israel on Mount Sinai, by the hand of Moshe.

What is meant by “the Torahs” that God gave Israel at Sinai? *Sifra* comments that this teaches that two Torahs were given to the Jews – one written and one oral. At Sinai, we received not one but two Torahs. The written Torah was revealed as a fixed text whose form was to be preserved unaltered. It is a divine text that yields multiple truths and a variety of interpretations. These interpretations make up the oral law. The nature of the oral law, however, is ambiguous, because it contains both the received traditions from Sinai as well as the innovative interpretations developed throughout the centuries. This prompts the following question: Whose words become incorporated into the oral tradition? We elaborate upon this idea in chapter 28; for now, consider R. Michael Rosensweig’s formulation:

The oral tradition ... though equally of Divine origin and authority, was entrusted to Moshe Rabbeinu and by extension to his successors, the *chachmei ha-mesora* of each subsequent generation, as a received oral tradition consisting of principles, details, and values. The *mesora* was intended to be conveyed by means of a distinctively human process consisting of painstaking transmission of data and halachic methodology, as well as the rigorous analysis and application of that tradition.¹⁵

Accordingly, as mentioned earlier, this book is premised on the belief that a correct understanding of Torah can be arrived at through studying the works of all of the *chachmei ha-mesora*.

15. “Mesorah as Halachic Source and Sensibility,” published in *Jewish Action* (Summer 2011).

This work presents a wide range of viewpoints. While we focus on thinkers who are universally accepted as *chachmei ha-mesora*, scholars whose mastery of Torah and embodiment of Torah values is uncontested, we also include texts that espouse positions that are controversial. For example, in dealing with the seeming contradiction between divine foreknowledge and free will, we present the views of R. Levi b. Gershon (better known as Ralbag or Gersonides), R. Chasdai Crescas, and R. Tzadok ha-Kohen Rabinowitz of Lublin.

There are several reasons we include these works. Firstly, just because a work is not mainstream does not mean it is incorrect. Rambam famously writes that we should “accept the truth from him who says it.”¹⁶ Moreover, even if we conclude that a position is wrong, it sheds light on the topic and helps us better understand the issue at hand. Finally, the views quoted are already well known. Studying them in the proper context will therefore help us assess their validity. The option of ignoring them is no longer tenable. Nevertheless, it should be understood that not all positions quoted in this book should be treated equally – from a methodological perspective, we treat a statement of Ramban very differently than we treat that of R. Crescas. To prevent confusion, when a position cited is not mainstream, we try to note that in the text.

THE STRUCTURE AND AHISTORICAL NATURE OF THIS BOOK

In this book, we will study *machshava* topically, pursuing matters like free will, reward and punishment, and belief. We will present multiple views on each topic. Generally, no attempt is made to reconcile these

16. Toward the beginning of *Shemona Perakim*, his introduction to *Masechet Avot*, he writes:

It is important to know, though, that I did not originate the ideas expressed or the explanations offered either in these chapters or in my commentary. Rather, they have been collected from the words of the sages in the Midrash, the Talmud, and in their other works, as well as from the words of earlier and later philosophers (Jewish and non-Jewish), and from the works of many others. Accept the truth from whoever utters it.

Likewise, see R. Avraham ben ha-Rambam in *Ma'amar odot Derashot Chazal*, who stresses accepting truth wherever it can be found and rails against those who are overly reliant upon authority.

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debates. Our goal is to determine the truth to the best of our ability, and all of the varying opinions expressed are part of that truth.

The advantage of the topical presentation is that it helps identify the nuances of each position. Moreover, it aims to leave the reader with a more comprehensive understanding of the topic at hand. It is for this reason that many traditional books, whether in *machshava* or Halacha, frequently jump between different eras in an attempt to arrive at the true (or multiple true) understanding of the *sugya*. As noted, this contrasts with the academic agenda of understanding the history of the period or the perspective of the thinker, as opposed to the more ambitious (and, in our case, perhaps presumptuous) goal of arriving at the truth through *talmud Torah* (the study of Torah).

In order to make the work accessible, I have tried to avoid jargon and use technical terminology only when necessary and after having defined the terms. I have done away with certain academic conventions, hopefully without sacrificing accuracy or sophistication.

All sources in the main text of the book have been translated; however, due to space constraints, certain texts are left untranslated in footnotes. Translations, many of which are culled from other sources with modifications, are not always precise.¹⁷ At times, I err on the side of clarity and readability at the expense of precision. This flaw is justified given that the goal of this work is to draw people into *machshava* who are intimidated by its abstruseness. Also, the original Hebrew generally will appear immediately preceding the translation, allowing readers to compare and clarify.

ORGANIZATION

In terms of organization, the three volumes of this work (God, Redemption, and Revelation) loosely accord with the three principles of R. Yosef Albo (c. 1380–1444). While this *sefer* is not based upon R. Albo's thinking,

17. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Talmud are adapted from the Soncino translation; translations from *Mishneh Torah* are by R. Eliyahu Touger, first published by *Moznayim* and available at chabad.org; and translations of *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* are adapted from the Friedländer translation (1904), available at sacred-texts.com.

I have borrowed his classification for purposes of organization. Thus, a brief introduction to R. Albo's categorization is in order.

Sefer ha-Ikkarim ("Book of Principles") is a fifteenth-century work by R. Albo that expounds upon the basic principles of Judaism. Rambam, of course, was the first to list principles of faith, enumerating thirteen. R. Albo felt that the basic principles of faith can be distilled into three basic beliefs: (1) the existence of the divine entity ("existence of God"); (2) the divine origin of the system of laws ("Torah from heaven," i.e., Revelation); and (3) the existence of divine providence, expressed in compensatory reward and punishment for humanity ("reward and punishment," i.e., Redemption). From these principles stem eight "roots":¹⁸

- From the existence of God: God's unity, incorporeality, timelessness, and perfection.
- From Torah from heaven: Prophecy and the genuineness of the divine messenger.
- From reward and punishment: God's knowledge, providence, and His administration of reward and punishment, whether in this world or the afterlife.

Thus, in the first volume of this work (to be published second), we discuss the nature of God and the obligation to believe in Him. This is preceded by an introduction that considers the significance of the study of *machshava* and defines the various fields within the study of *machshava*. In volume two (the current volume), we consider three themes relating

18.

ספר העיקרים מאמר א פרק כו

העולה ממה שבארנו בזה המאמר הוא, כי מספר העיקרים לדת האלהית שלשה, שהם מציאות השם ותורה מן השמים ושכר ועונש, כי אלו השלשה לא תצויר תורה אלהית זולתם. ושתחת אלו השלשה, שרשים אחרים מסתעפים מהם, הם אצל העיקרים הללו במדרגת המינים הנכנסים תחת הסוגים, כי בהסתלק אחד מהשרשים לא יסתלק העקר, ובהסתלק העקר יסתלקו השרשים כמו שבארנו. והשרשים שהם תחת עקר מציאות השם, כפי מה שיחייבהו העיון ולפי מה שתגזרהו תורת משה, הם האחדות, וסלוק הגשמות, ושאיין לו יתברך יחס עם הזמן, ושהוא מסולק מן החסרונות. ותחת תורה מן השמים הם הנבואה, ושליחות השליח. ותחת השכר והעונש הם ידיעת השם, וההשגחה לשכר ולעונש אם בעולם הזה ואם בעולם הבא בין שיהיה רוחני בין שיהיה גשמי.

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to reward and punishment: free will, which forms the ethical basis for reward and punishment; *olam ha-ba*, or the world to come; and the messianic era. Finally, in the third volume, Revelation (to be published last), we tackle four topics: interpreting the Torah, *bechirat Yisrael* (the nature of God's choice to reveal Himself to the Jewish people), *ta'amei ha-mitzvot* (searching for the reasons for *mitzvot*), and providence (God revealing Himself in history).

DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This *sefer* is dedicated to my grandfather, R. Yosef Mordechai (Martin) Wieder, a true *chasid*. My grandfather taught me what genuine *yirat shamayim* (fear of heaven) and *ahavat Hashem* (love of God) are. I hope one day to approach the depth of his bond with the Almighty. If only *yirat shamayim* was as easy as writing a book.

I would like to thank R. Aaron Lopiansky, Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, who introduced me to *machshava* and has guided me (since eleventh grade) through every step of my life. Expressions of gratitude cannot convey my appreciation for all that he has given me. Many of the ideas in this volume are (often without attribution) R. Lopiansky's. Moreover, R. Lopiansky graciously looked over most of this volume, offering critical insights.

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Netanel Wiederblank

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Unit Five

Free will

Chapter 13

Introduction to Free Will

Rambam (Maimonides, 1138–1204) refers to free will as עיקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה, a fundamental principle that is the basis of Torah and *mitzvot* (*Hilchot Teshuva* 5:3).¹ Yet it is a concept that has been challenged throughout the ages and remains the subject

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1. Some have wondered why Rambam does not include free will in his thirteen principles of faith given the fact that Rambam twice (*Hilchot Teshuva* 5:3 and *Moreh ha-Nevuchim* 3:17) refers to free will as a fundamental principle of the Torah. R. Gedaliah b. Solomon Lipschutz (in his commentary on *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* entitled *Anafim*) argues that free will is included in the principle of reward and punishment. Abarbanel (*Rosh Amana* ch. 16) uses the absence of free will from the list to support his idea that Rambam lists only doctrines relating to God and His actions toward mankind. Because free will relates solely to man, it does not qualify as one of the thirteen principles. For the same reason, Abarbanel argues, Rambam omits the principles that humans possess a soul and that the soul is immortal; these both relate only to man and not to God. Special thanks to R. Willie Roth for pointing out these sources. Additionally, Tashbeitz (*Oheiv Mishpat* ch. 8) grapples with this issue, raising (but rejecting) the possibility (as does Abarbanel) that perhaps Rambam merely wanted to keep to the number thirteen (as in the “Thirteen *Middot*”) even though there really are several other foundational beliefs. Tashbeitz himself suggests that Rambam counts only the “*avot*” of belief, meaning those that are explicitly attested to in Scripture, leaving aside the “*toldot*,” which are necessary but can be derived from the other thirteen principles. Thus, while there may be verses that indicate that

of significant controversy. Accordingly, it behooves us to attempt to understand this important principle.

This unit is divided into five chapters. In chapter 13, we introduce the topic, consider the meaning of free will, and seek to determine how we know that we have it. In chapter 14, we address the seeming contradiction between divine foreknowledge and free will. We also evaluate the perspectives of those who appear to deny free will. In chapter 15, we discuss the scope of free will. Specifically, we consider whether there are times when we are not free. Next, in chapter 16, we analyze God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart and other instances of divine meddling in human decision-making. God's role in politics and history is assessed in this context. Finally, in chapter 17, we address additional challenges to free will, including advancements in neuroscience, the problem of prophecy, and the concept of *bashert*. In the appendices, we tackle a number of topics related to our discussion of free will, such as the question of whether evil exists and the meaning of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.²

13.1 ANCIENT DILEMMA, MODERN CONCERN

Intuitively, we feel free. Many times each day, we see before us two paths and must choose our course. We grapple to figure out what is right, and we struggle to make the virtuous choice. Sometimes we emerge victorious, and other times we fail. We feel confident, however, that the choice is ours. We can imagine choosing the other option; frequently we do.

Despite the simplicity of the above analysis, the notion of free will has long been under attack. Today, it is questioned based on the findings of neuroscience, which, some have argued, have demonstrated that human decision-making should be seen as a neurological phenomenon with little or no room for freedom. Some studies have revealed that many of our decisions are made even before we are consciously aware of them.³ Neuroscientist Sam Harris has argued, "You seem to be an agent

the Torah assumes free will to exist, there is no verse that states the idea explicitly as a required belief. Cf. Menachem Kellner *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, p. 53.

2. Many thanks to Matt Lubin for his help with this chapter. Many of the points made are his.

3. See C. Soon, M. Brass, H. Heinze, and J. Haynes (2008), "Unconscious determinants of free decisions in the human brain," *Nature Neuroscience* 11 (5), pp. 543–545; and

acting of your own free will. The problem, however, is that this point of view cannot be reconciled with what we know about the human brain.”⁴ In the twentieth century, some psychologists led the attack against free will by asserting that all of our decisions result simply from nature and nurture.⁵ As psychologist Daniel Wegner claimed in 2002, “It seems we are agents. It seems we cause what we do.... It is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion.”⁶

Of course, challenges to free will are not new. In ancient times, many argued for determinism based on fate. Others rejected free will on theological grounds: if there is divine foreknowledge, how can we truly be free? Others questioned freedom based on the Torah itself; multiple passages throughout Tanach imply that God at times revokes free will.

Indeed, from the beginning of time, man has attempted to absolve himself of responsibility by denying his own freedom. Kayin, for example, blamed God for the murder of his brother Hevel:

מדרש תנחומא (ורשא) פרשת בראשית סימן ט

ואף קין כך אמר אני הרגתי אותו בראת כי יצה"ר אתה שומר את הכל ולי הנחת אותו להרגו אתה הוא שהרגתו שנקראת אנכי שאלו קבלת קרבני כמותו לא הייתי מתקנא בו.

Kayin said [to God], “I killed him? You created an evil inclination within me! You watch everything, and You allowed me to kill him. You killed him. If You would have accepted my sacrifice as You accepted his, I would not have been jealous of him.”

M. Matsushashi and M. Hallett (2008), “The timing of the conscious intention to move,” *European Journal of Neuroscience* 28, pp. 2344–2351.

4. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sam-harris/free-will-and-why-you-sti_b_869726.html.
5. Of course, society has not accepted these conclusions. Our legal system, for example, is based on the presumption of free will. We do not exonerate a murderer because he had no choice but to commit the crime. Moreover, not all neuroscientists or psychologists agree with these findings. See, for example, “Is Neuroscience the Death of Free Will?” in *The New York Times*, February 2, 2008, for Dr. Eddy Nahmias’ defense of freedom.
6. <http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?tttype=2&tid=8770>.

Later on in history, acceptance of free will, and therefore responsibility, is what set authentic Judaism apart from deviant sects. In the first century CE, Josephus Flavius records how different conceptions of determinism differentiated the three major Jewish sects of antiquity: Essenes assumed that fate determined everything; *Tzedukim* (Sadducees) rejected both fate and divine intervention; and *Perushim* (Pharisees) believed in man's ability to choose good from evil yet acknowledged divine providence. Josephus writes:

At that time there were three schools of thought among the Jews, which held different opinions concerning human affairs; the first being that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes. As for the Pharisees, they say that certain events are the work of Fate, but not all; as to other events, it depends upon ourselves whether they shall take place or not.

The sect of the Essenes, however, declares that Fate is mistress of all things, and that nothing befalls men unless it be in accordance with her decree.

But the Sadducees do away with Fate, holding that there is no such thing and that human actions are not achieved in accordance with her decree, but that all things lie within our power, so that we ourselves are responsible for our well-being, while we suffer misfortune through our own thoughtlessness.⁷

Although denial of freedom always posed a challenge, nowadays it poses a particularly difficult one. In the words of R. Shlomo Wolbe (1914–2005):

עלי שור חלק ב עמוד מא ס"ק ה
מכל הכפירות והעבודות הזרות שנתחדשו בתקופות השונות הגיעה
תקופתנו לנקודת השפל. הכפירה של דורנו היא בבחירה עצמה.
אין להאריך כאן בגורמים לזה. במשפטי האומות יש היום נטיה
לפטור רוצחים בעלי נטיות חולניות וכדומה מאחריות, אם יש סיבה
פסיכולוגית למעשיהם. גם לתוך עולמנו חדרה השקפה זאת. מי מאתנו

7. *Antiquities* 13:171–173, trans. H. Thackeray (Loeb Classical Library, 1976).

מאמין שהאדם אינו מוכרח לחטוא? מי מאמין שאפשר להיות מיום הכפורים זה עד יום הכפורים הבא בלי חטא - הן מי יאמין שיום אחד יכול לעבור בלי חטא?

הלוואי שמיום כיפור נוציא אמונה ברורה שאנו באמת בעלי בחירה לסדר חיינו באופן שלא נכשל בחטא. ביררנו את הגבולות של הבחירה אך עלינו לדעת כי יסוד האדם ויסוד התורה היא הבחירה והיא הראשונה שבמעלות העליונות אשר בעבורן נברא האדם. בפרט בתקופה שלנו בעקבתא דמשיחא יש להתחזק עד מאד באמונה ברורה כי יכול נוכל להתגבר על יצרנו וכי אנחנו אחראים על מעשינו ועתידים לתת את הדין עליהם.

Of all the heresies that have arisen throughout the ages, our era has reached a low point. The heresy of our generation is denial of freedom itself... In secular courts, there is a tendency to exonerate murderers with morbid tendencies from responsibility if there is a psychological motivation for their actions.⁸ This outlook has crept into our world as well. Who among us believes that a person is not compelled to sin? Who believes that a person can live from Yom Kippur to Yom Kippur without sin? Who even thinks a person can go *one day* without sin?

If only we would emerge from this coming Yom Kippur with the absolute faith that we are truly free to order our lives in a way that we will not sin. We have clarified the boundaries of freedom, now we must know that the foundation of man and the foundation of Torah is freedom... and remember that we are responsible for our actions and will be held accountable for them.

8. The notion of exonerated based on insanity is not foreign to Judaism. Thus, someone defined as a *shoteh* is not punished for his crimes. (Action may be taken to protect victims, but not in the form of punishment.) R. Wolbe is alluding to an expanded legal definition of insanity. Rejecting free will has major implications on the justice system. As legal analyst Jeffrey Rosen reasoned in *The New York Times Magazine*, "Since all behavior is caused by our brains, wouldn't this mean all behavior could potentially be excused? ... The death of free will, or its exposure as a convenient illusion, some worry, could wreak havoc on our sense of moral and legal responsibility" (see <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/11/magazine/11Neurolaw.t.html>).

According to R. Wolbe, a central challenge to our growth as people is our subliminal questioning of the extent of our freedom. Scientific evidence bears this out. Psychological studies show that people who believe they have free will tend to act with a greater sense of moral responsibility than fatalists and determinists, who deny their ability to control their destiny.⁹ For example, people who believe that their self-control is nearly unlimited (e.g., “I can change my eating and be a better person, it just takes willpower”) tend to be much more successful at fulfilling resolutions than people who believe that we all are born with a limited amount of self-control (e.g., “I can’t help myself from eating all this chocolate – I inherited the ‘chocolate gene’ from my mom!”).¹⁰

Moreover, as Dr. Eddy Nahmias writes, “Simply exposing people to scientific claims that free will is an illusion can lead them to misbehave, for instance, cheating more or helping others less.”¹¹ Consider the following experiment: random people were promised \$1 for every correct answer they gave on an exam and were allowed to compile their own scores. Those who were first exposed to a statement by a famous scientist claiming that we lack free will were far more likely to cheat.¹² These experiments accentuate the grave danger we face when we are exposed to a society that to a greater and greater degree denies our freedom, and highlight the need to consider the Torah’s response to these challenges – our goal for this unit.

13.2 WHAT DOES FREE WILL MEAN?

The Hebrew term typically translated as free will is *bechira chofshit*. However, this translation appears imprecise, since the term free will

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9. Five powerful studies that support this thesis are cited in “The Teenage Brain: Self Control” by B. J. Casey and Kristina Caudle in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2013), 22:82.
 10. A. Mukhopadhyay and G.V. Johar (2005), “Where There Is a Will, Is There a Way? Effects of Lay Theories of Self-Control on Setting and Keeping Resolutions,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, pp. 779–786.
 11. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/19/health/19beha.html?scp=5&sq=psychology%20jonathan%20schooler&st=cse>.
 12. “Do You Have Free Will? Yes, It’s the Only Choice” by John Tierney (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/22/science/22tier.html?_r=1).

implies the freedom to will. Very few thinkers would argue that a person actually has total freedom to will – a person's desires, for example, may be biologically rooted, psychologically inspired, or instigated by the *yeitzer ha-ra* (evil inclination). Presumably, *bechira chofshit* means that we have the freedom to choose our actions despite our wills and desires, which may sometimes be uncontrollable.¹³ This too is not so simple; as we consider in chapter 16, there are sources that seem to indicate that we are fully in control of our thoughts and emotions, and there are sources that imply that to a large degree, we may not even control our actions.

For the time being, we will use the term free will in the conventional (yet imprecise) sense of freedom to act. When we carefully read the words of Rambam, we see an additional component to the definition of free will:

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה א

רשות לכל אדם נתונה אם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך טובה ולהיות צדיק הרשות בידו, ואם רצה להטות עצמו לדרך רעה ולהיות רשע הרשות בידו. הוא שכתוב בתורה הן האדם היה כאחד ממנו לדעת טוב ורע, כלומר הן מין זה של אדם היה יחיד בעולם ואין מין שני דומה לו בזה הענין שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ ואין מי שיעכב בידו מלעשות הטוב או הרע, וכיון שכן הוא פן ישלח ידו.

Everyone has the freedom to follow either the good ways and to be righteous or to follow the evil ways and be wicked. The Torah

13. Even philosophers usually do not understand free will to mean freedom of will. For example, Timothy O'Connor (*The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2014 edition) defines free will as the "philosophical term of art for a particular sort of capacity of rational agents to choose a course of *action* from among various alternatives." As Matt Lubin pointed out, we actually can distinguish between four different aspects of freedom:

- (a) freedom of will/desire;
- (b) freedom of *selecting* an action (to choose a course of action from among different desires);
- (c) freedom of action (after having decided to act in a particular way);
- (d) the mental capacity to make moral judgments.

Rambam, as we shall see, seems to define free will as including b, c, and d.

says, “Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil,” i.e., there is only one mankind in the world and there is no other [comparable] type with respect to this matter, such that he alone with his intellect and thoughts knows what is good and evil, and he can do all that he wishes, and there is nothing that will prevent him from doing good or evil. Accordingly, the verse states, “lest he stretch out his hand [and sin].”¹⁴

Rambam informs us of a number of important facts. Firstly, man alone has the intellectual capacity to distinguish good from evil. No other creation has been endowed with this capacity.¹⁵ Secondly, free will

14. Translation adapted from that of Immanuel O’Levy.

15. There is an interesting discussion as to whether angels have free will. Rambam indicates here that they do not; however, certain midrashim describe angelic sins. Here is one example:

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף סז עמוד ב

תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל: עזאזל - שמכפר על מעשה עווא ועזאל.

Who are Uzza and Aza’eil?

רש"י שם

עווא ועזאל - מלאכי חבלה שירדו לארץ בימי נעמה אחות תובל קין ועליהם נאמר ויראו בני האלהים את בנות האדם (בראשית 1) כלומר, על העריות מכפר.

Two midrashim that seem to refer to fallen angels are (ווארשא תרל"ד) פרקי דרבי אליעזר and (פרק כ"ב עמוד כ ילקוט שמעוני בראשית רמז מד) פרק כ"ב עמוד כ.

R. Bachya compares angels sinning to the sin of Adam. According to R. Bachya, Adam, before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, had no internal desire to do wrong. Nevertheless, sin apparently was possible. We explain how he might have sinned according to R. Bachya in 13.4 and 24.7. For now, suffice it to say that it was not a sin in the classical sense as much as an error in judgment that stemmed from Adam’s desire to serve God in a more meaningful way (from within the realm of freedom). The error of Uzza and Aza’eil was rooted in the same desire. See *Michtav mei-Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 141. In *Michtav mei-Eliyahu*, vol. 2, p. 214, R. Dessler suggests that any sins committed by angels were done in order to teach us a lesson.

Having distinguished between different aspects of free will, we might consider if one of the two could pertain to angels. For example, Ramchal (*Da’at Tevunot* 2:31) suggests that they may have the ability to act independently but do not truly recognize good and evil as such. R. Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe Shemot* 1:1) may assume the opposite. This distinction might explain how Rambam implies (*Moreh ha-Nevuchim* 2:7) that angels have some measure of choice. See R. Bachya’s comments to *Bereishit* 3:6 and 19:13 for a discussion of how an angel can sin.

implies more than autonomy. Consequential and just free will includes two components:¹⁶

- (a) שיהא הוא מעצמו בדעתו ובמחשבתו יודע הטוב והרע, that man has the ability to know that which is right and wrong;
- (b) ועושה כל מה שהוא חפץ, that man has the ability to choose.

Let us consider each of these two components.

The Ability to Know That Which Is Right and Wrong

Without the ability to discern right from wrong, our freedom of choice would not be meaningful. An animal may choose which field to pasture upon;¹⁷ however, this decision cannot be compared to God's gift to mankind. Thus, free will is rooted in man's intellect, because it is his intellect (בדעתו ובמחשבתו) that allows him to determine that which is right.¹⁸ Thus, free will is the ability to ascertain what is right or wrong (a) and then to act accordingly (b).

This relates to Rambam's conception of man, as explicated in the first chapter of *Moreh ha-Nevuchim*, where he defines the notion of *tzelem Elokim*:¹⁹

Also, R. Yitzchak Grossman pointed to the very interesting view of Ralbag (*Parashat Bereishit* in the section beginning *divrei ha-sippur*) that angels do have free will – as it is logically inseparable from intelligence – but that they nevertheless never sin, as they have no material aspect that might induce them toward vulgar desires and sin. (This relates to Ralbag's general position on free will.) For a discussion of this topic, see http://bdld.info/2011/10/25/rebel-angels/#identifier_7_909 and *Fallen Angels in Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan Literature* (Philadelphia, 1926), which discusses these midrashim and their origins.

16. R. Mayer Twersky pointed out this inference.

17. See Ramban *Bereishit* 1:29:

בעלי נפש התנועה יש להם קצת מעלה בנפשם, נדמו בה לבעלי הנפש המשכלת, ויש להם בחירה בטובתם ומזוניהם ויברחו מן הצער והמיתה.

18. Note that Rambam understands that a human can, to some degree, independently, and without revelation, determine that which is right. We will return to this topic in chapter 27.

19. Rambam distinguishes between the word *tzelem*, which is an abstract quality, and *to'ar* (e.g., יפה תואר), which has a physical connotation. Thus, *tzelem Elokim* indicates that there is an abstract quality that man and God both possess. This quality is the ability to reason.

מורה הנבוכים חלק א פרק א
אמנם צלם הוא נופל על הצורה הטבעית, ר"ל על הענין אשר בו נתעצם
הדבר והיה מה שהוא, והוא אמתתו, מאשר הוא הנמצא שהוא אשר הענין
ההוא באדם, הוא אשר בעבורו תהיה ההשגה האנושית. ומפני ההשגה
הזאת השכלית נאמר בו, בצלם אלהים ברא אותו.

The term *tzelem* signifies the specific form, meaning that which constitutes the essence of a thing, whereby the thing is what it is; the reality of a thing insofar as it is that particular being. In man, the "form" is the constituent that gives him human perception; and on account of this intellectual perception, the term *tzelem* is employed in the sentence, "In the *tzelem* of God He created him."

In other words, what makes us human is our intellectual capacity;²⁰ the essence of man is his ability to differentiate right from wrong, which serves as the basis for free will.²¹

20. Likewise, in *Hilchot Yesodei ha-Torah* 4:8, he writes:

נפש כל בשר, היא צורתו שנתן לו האל. והרעת היתרה המצויה בנפשו של אדם, היא צורת האדם השלם ברעתו; ועל צורה זו נאמר בתורה "נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו" (בראשית א:כז), כלומר שתהיה לו צורה היודעת ומשגת הדעות שאין להם גולם, עד שיידמה להן. ואינו אומר על צורה זו הניכרת לעיניים, שהיא הפה וההוטם והלסתות ושאר רושם הגוף, שזו תואר שמה.

21. Other thinkers go even further, defining *tzelem Elokim* as free will itself (*Meshech Chochma Bereishit* 1:26). Hence, argues *Meshech Chochma* (*Bereishit* 3:4–5), the expansion of free will brought about by eating from the *ורע* demanded the introduction of death, because if man were to live forever, he could be seen as Godlike. This can be seen in the following verses:

בראשית ג:ד, כב
וַיֹּאמֶר הַנְּחֹשׁ, אֵל הָאִשָּׁה... כִּי, יָדַע אֱלֹהִים, כִּי בְיוֹם אֲכַלְכֶּם מִמֶּנּוּ, וְנִפְקְחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם; וְהִיִּיתֶם, כְּאֱלֹהִים, יֹדְעֵי, טוֹב וָרָע. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֱלֹהִים, הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאֹדָם מִמֶּנּוּ, לְדַעַת, טוֹב וָרָע; וְעַתָּה, פֶּן יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ, וְלָקַח גַּם מֵעֵץ הַחַיִּים, וְאָכַל, וְחִי לְעֹלָם.

This concern is not relevant for angels; because they lack free will, they never would be seen as Godlike, and therefore, they can live forever. (Accordingly, in *olam ha-ba*, where there is no free will [see 24.6], there is no need for death.)

The Ability to Choose

If we can choose our actions, does that mean that God has ceded control over what happens in the world? To answer this question, we have to parse Rambam's words carefully.

"Choosing," for Rambam, actually involves two separate ideas: (1) the ability to choose (i.e., the cognitive ability to make a choice), and (2) the ability to carry out that choice (control over the physical world to implement such decisions). The first does not automatically include the second. One can, in theory, want to do something without being able to put that desire into action. Rambam stresses that man has both components.²² This is true to such an extent that Rambam notes that man's ability to act seems to limit God's control over what happens in the universe:²³

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה ד
ואל תתמה ותאמר היאך יהיה האדם עושה כל מה שיחפוץ ויהיו מעשיו מסורים לו וכי יעשה בעולם דבר שלא ברשות קונו ולא חפצו והכתוב אומר כל אשר חפץ ה' עשה בשמים ובארץ, דע שהכל כחפצו יעשה ואף על פי שמעשינו מסורין לנו, כיצד כשם שהיוצר חפץ להיות האש והרוח עולים למעלה והמים והארץ יורדים למטה והגלגל סובב בעיגול וכן שאר בריות העולם להיות כמנהגן שחפץ בו, ככה חפץ להיות האדם רשותו בידו וכל מעשיו מסורין לו ולא יהיה לו לא כופה ולא מושך אלא הוא מעצמו ובדעתו שנתן לו האל עושה כל שהאדם יכול לעשות.

A person should not wonder: How is it possible for one to do whatever he wants and be responsible for his own deeds? Is it possible for anything to happen in this world without the permission and desire of its Creator as [*Tehillim* 135:6] states, "Whatever God wishes, He has done in the heavens and in the earth"? One must know that everything is done in accord with His will and, nevertheless, we are responsible for our deeds. How is this [apparent contradiction] resolved? Just as the Creator

22. Thus, man is free even in the realm of action (עושה כל מה שיחפוץ) ויהיו מעשיו מסורים לו וכי יעשה בעולם דבר שלא ברשות קונו ולא חפצו והכתוב אומר כל אשר חפץ ה' עשה בשמים ובארץ, דע שהכל כחפצו יעשה ואף על פי שמעשינו מסורין לנו, כיצד כשם שהיוצר חפץ להיות האש והרוח עולים למעלה והמים והארץ יורדים למטה והגלגל סובב בעיגול וכן שאר בריות העולם להיות כמנהגן שחפץ בו, ככה חפץ להיות האדם רשותו בידו וכל מעשיו מסורין לו ולא יהיה לו לא כופה ולא מושך אלא הוא מעצמו ובדעתו שנתן לו האל עושה כל שהאדם יכול לעשות.

23. Of course, God chooses to grant man this ability and has the power to revoke it at will.

desired that [the elements of] fire and wind rise upward and [those of] water and earth descend downward, that the heavenly spheres revolve in a circular orbit, and all the other creations of the world follow the nature that He desired for them, so too, *He desired that man have free choice and all his deeds be in his control, without being pulled or forced. Rather, he, on his own initiative, with the knowledge that God has granted him, will do anything that man is able to do.*

Thus, Rambam emphasizes both the ability to choose (*reshuto be-yado*) and the ability to act (*ve-chol ma'asav mesurin be-yado*).²⁴ Of course, man is not always granted the ability to carry out his plans. We will return to this conundrum as we continue to investigate the nature of free will (specifically in 15.5, 16.4, 16.8, 17.3, and generally in Unit 11, when we consider the nature of God's plan in the universe).

13.3 HOW DO WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE FREE WILL?

R. Sa'adya Gaon (882–942, sometimes known as Rasag) notes the magnitude of this freedom insofar as it seems to limit God. As Rambam notes, this limitation is self-imposed in order to allow for freedom (*Hilchot Teshuva* 5:4) and sometimes is rescinded (*Hilchot Teshuva* 6:3).

Rasag then addresses the question of how we know that we are free. Rasag frequently writes that we know the fundamentals of our religion based on Scripture, tradition, and logic. Free will complies with this pattern. In fact, Rasag proves the veracity of free will based on experience, logic, Scripture, and tradition.

אמונות ודעות מאמר ד פרק ה

ואומר עוד כי הבורא ית' ברוממותו אינו משפיע על מעשה בני אדם כלל, ואינו מכריחם לא על משמעת ולא על מרי, ויש לי על כך ראיות מדרך המוחש, ומדרך המושכל, וממה שבכתובים ובמסורת.

I maintain that the Creator does not allow His power to interfere in the least with the actions of men, nor does He compel them

24. Special thanks to Matt Lubin for pointing this out.

to be either obedient or disobedient. I have proofs for this doctrine founded on experience, reason, Scripture, and tradition.²⁵

Let us consider each of his proofs.

Experience

מִן הַמּוֹחַשׁ, מִצֵּאתֵי שֶׁהָאָדָם מְרַגֵּשׁ בְּעֵצְמוֹ שֶׁהוּא יָכוֹל לְדַבֵּר וְיָכוֹל לִשְׁתַּקֵּק, וְיָכוֹל לְתַפּוֹשׁ וְיָכוֹל לְעֻזּוֹב, וְאֵינּוּ מְרַגֵּשׁ שׁוֹם כִּי אַחֵר הַמַּעֲכָבוּ מִלְּעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנוֹ כִּלְלֵל, וְהַדְּבָר מְסוּר בְּיָדוֹ שִׁינְהִיג אֶת טַבְעוֹ כְּפִי הַכְרַעַת דַּעְתּוֹ, אִם עָשָׂה כֵן הָרִי הוּא פִּקַּח, וְאִם לֹא הָרִי הוּא סָכֵל.

In regard to experience, I have found that a man observes from his own experience that he has the power to speak or to be silent, to seize an object or to abandon it; he does not notice any other force that would hinder him in any way from exercising his will-power. He directs the impulses of his nature by his reason, and if he follows the bidding of reason, he is prudent, and if he does not, he is a fool.

Occasionally, though, our perception of reality is faulty. A person may see a mirage that does not exist. Therefore, we must wonder whether we can trust our perception of freedom. Rasag assumes that in the absence of compelling counterevidence, there is no reason to question our experience. If our perception of freedom were faulty, then, like in the case of a mirage, we surely would discover our error. But in this case, our experience constantly reaffirms our perception. Many times each day, we struggle with decisions. Even after we have chosen, we can imagine having chosen differently; we do not feel compelled. But even if one doubts his own perception of reality, there still are three other confirmations of our freedom.²⁶

25. This translation, as well as those that follow, are adapted from the Alexander Altmann edition of *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (first published in 1946), pp. 120–121 of the 2002 edition.

26. Interestingly, the *Zohar* invokes three of Rasag's four proofs:

זוהר חדש - תיקונים כרך ב דף צח עמוד א
אמר רבי יוסי בוצינא קדישא הא אוקמוה [ברכות דל"ג] הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים
[שנאמר ועתה ישראל כו' כ"א ליראה]. וקרא אחרא כתיב מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות והטוב

R. Yehuda ha-Levi (1075–1141; sometimes known as Rihal) puts it more forcefully: “Only a perverse hypocrite would deny that a free climate exists, allowing one to do as he pleases. Such a person might make such a statement, but he could not really believe it” (*Kuzari* 5:20).²⁷ Rihal indicates that the desire to do as one pleases unconsciously motivates the denier of free will to reach his absurd conclusion.

Logic

Rasag offers numerous logical proofs for free will. First, he turns to abstract (and somewhat complex) logic.²⁸ Then he adduces evidence based on the fact that the author of the Torah (and the source for its

איכה ג). ואם קודם דאתיין לעלמא אתגזר עלייהו למהוי צדיקים או רשעים או בינונים לא הוה עתיד למהוי לון אגרא ועונשא ולא הוה ליה לנביא למימר לון מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות והטוב. ולא הוה לון למ"מ למימר הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים.

The *Zohar* argues that if it were the case that before a person comes to the world it already is decreed whether he will be a *tzaddik*, *rasha*, or *beinoni*, there should not be statements like מפי עליון לא תצא (tradition) and הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים (Scripture) that indicate that we have free will. Moreover, there could be no reward and punishment (logic). Only experience is left out. Is that because our perception of reality can prove faulty? Later, the *Zohar* alludes to a secret concerning free will. We will return to that secret in the section on R. Tzadok.

27. Rihal continues, “The proof is that you see how he prepares himself for things that he hopes for or fears.” Here, we see that he primarily is refuting fatalism, which presumes that whatever happens is predestined. If that were his true belief, argues Rihal, he would not take precautions.

28. Rasag maintains that one action cannot be attributed to two agents. If God were to interfere with the actions of man, man’s actions would be ascribed to God and man together. He writes:

כבר הוכח במה שקדם, כי בטל הוא שתהא פעולה אחת משני פועלים, ומי שחשב שהבורא יתרום מכריח את האדם על איזה דבר, הרי עשה הפעולה האחת לשניהם יחד.

Earlier, he writes:

ומה ידמה לצדק הבורא, שנתן לאדם את הכח והיכולת לעשות את כל מצותיו. ונראה לי שראוי כי תהיה היכולת לפני הפעולה, כי אם היתה עם הפעולה יחד, היה כל אחד סבת השני, או שאין האחד סבה לשני. ואילו היתה אחרי הפעולה, הרי לא יוכל להחזיר מה שכבר עשה. וראיתי לבאר כי כשם שמעשה האדם הוא פעולה, כן גם עזיבתו מעשות המעשה היא גם כן פעולה, כי לא עזבו אלא כדי לעשות הפכו... כי פעולת האדם מקרה, ואם לא יאהב - ישנא וכדומה... וראוי שאבאר כי אין האדם עושה מעשה אלא אם רוצה לעשות, כי לא יתכן שיעשה מי שאין בו רצון, או שאינו בעל רצון...

authority) is a just and intelligent God (earlier in the work, he proved that a just and intelligent God exists²⁹):

אלו היה מכריחו לא היה מקום שיצוהו ויזהירו.
If God had compelled man, there would be no point in giving him commandments and prohibitions.

The entire Torah, with its statutes and restrictions, is predicated upon our ability to make free choices. Of what value are *mitzvot* and *aveirot* if our destiny is predetermined?

Rambam elaborates:

רמב"ם הלכות תשובה פרק ה הלכה ד
אילו האל היה גוזר על האדם להיות צדיק או רשע או אילו היה שם דבר שמושך את האדם בעיקר תולדתו לדרך מן הדרכים או למדע מן המדעות או לדעה מן הדעות או למעשה מן המעשים כמו שבודים מלבם הטפשים הוברי שמים היאך היה מצוה לנו על ידי הנביאים עשה כך ואל תעשה כך הטיבו דרכיכם ואל תלכו אחרי רשעכם והוא מתחלת ברייתו כבר נגזר עליו או תולדתו תמשוך אותו לדבר שאי אפשר לזוז ממנו, ומה מקום היה לכל התורה כולה ובאי זה דין ואיזה משפט נפרע מן הרשע או משלם שכר לצדיק, השופט כל הארץ לא יעשה משפט.
Were God to decree that an individual be righteous or wicked or that there would be a quality that draws a person by his essential nature to any particular path [of behavior], way of thinking, attributes, or deeds, as imagined by many of the fools [who believe] in astrology, how could He command us through [the words of] the prophets: "Do this," "Do not do this," "Improve your behavior," or "Do not follow after your wickedness"? [According to their mistaken conception,] from the beginning of man's creation, it would be decreed upon him, or his nature would draw him, to a particular quality, and he could not depart from it. What place would there be, then, for the entire Torah? According to which

29. See pp. 49–62 of *Amânât wal-i'tiqâdât* (The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs), translated by Alexander Altmann, in H. Lewy, A. Altmann, and I. Heinemann, eds., *Three Jewish Philosophers* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).

judgment or sense of justice would retribution be administered to the wicked or reward to the righteous? Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?!

Rasag offers additional support for free will:

ועוד אלו הכריחו על פעולה מסויימת לא יתכן שיעניש אותו עליה
Moreover, if God compelled man to do a certain action, it would be preposterous to punish him for it.

The Torah promises reward to those who choose good and punishment for those who choose evil. Such promises surely would be unjust if the actors did not make their choices freely.³⁰

Ramban adds an additional component to this ancient argument. It is not just that reward is fair only if we are free – we are free so that we can be rewarded fairly:

רמב"ן דברים ל:ו

ונראה מן הכתובים ענין זה שאומר, כי מזמן הבריאה הייתה רשות ביד האדם לעשות כרצונו צדיק או רשע, וכל זמן התורה כן, כדי שיהיה להם זכות בכחירתם בטוב ועונש ברצותם ברע.

It appears from Scripture that from the time of creation, freedom was granted to man to be righteous or evil.³¹ This will be true the entire period of the Torah³² so that *people's choice of good will be a merit and punishment will be warranted when they pursue evil.*

30. Even if we could justify the threat of punishment, as R. Crescas may suggest (see below 14.4), the actualization of these penalties would be unjust.

31. Interestingly, Ramban goes on to explain that initially, Adam naturally was inclined to do good, and only after he sinned did the inner battle against evil commence (היה עושה בטבעו מה שראוי לעשות ולא היה לו ברצונו דבר והפכו); nevertheless, even in his initial reality, he had the freedom to choose evil, as indeed he did. Thus, "from the time of creation" man had the choice to be righteous or wicked. See 13.4 and 13.5 for elaboration.

32. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 97a) divides the world into three periods: "The first two thousand will be desolation (*tohu*); the next two thousand will be Torah; and the final two thousand will be the messianic era." Ramban here is writing that for the first two periods, freedom will reign. However, *mashiach* will come at some point